

YULETIDE TASTE



MICHAEL QUINE/LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

Elvia Martinez at Dona Maria Tamales Restaurant prepares for Dec. 23 and 24, when it will sell upward of 3,100 dozen hand-made tamales.

WRAPPERS' DELIGHT

Christmas Eve tradition of eating tamales, corn husk-encased pockets of goodness, growing

By HEIDI KNAPP RINELLA
LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

Thirty-seven thousand, two hundred tamales. That's how many of this traditional Mexican Christmas Eve food the two locations of Dona Maria Tamales Restaurant expect to sell Dec. 23 and 24.

That's a lot of tamales: 3,100 dozen, compared to the 600 dozen the restaurants will sell during the rest of December and the 200 to 250 dozen they sell in an average month.

Yes, tamales are a big part of Mexican cuisine on Christmas Eve, and they're becoming more widely embraced as people of other cultures learn about these corn-husk-wrapped cornmeal pockets of goodness

with meat, chicken or cheese tucked inside.

Dona Maria, which has locations on Las Vegas Boulevard South downtown and on North Tenaya Way, is, after 30 years in business, the dean of local Mexican restaurants and known locally for its tamales; hence the name. And while Christmas Eve tamales are a big and growing tradition, many — probably most — prefer to buy rather than make them, because they tend to be both time-consuming and somewhat of a challenge.

"Tamales are just labor-intensive," Dona Maria co-owner Neriza Johnson said. "That's why usually, when you're at home, you'll get five or six ladies that will make them. You have to wrap them

ONLINE EXTRA

VIDEO:
[reviewjournal.com/
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tight, but not too tight. They're a little tricky."

Also key, Johnson said, is what goes into them.

"The secret is finding the fresh ingredients, and really the cornmeal is the main secret," she said. "It gives it the flavor. The main thing is finding good cornmeal, good corn husks, and then you put in whatever recipes your family has."

Her restaurant uses cornmeal masa, imported from Mexico, as opposed to the more flourlike masa harina.

"They make it from the real corn, and so it's fresh and it has a different taste," she said of the masa. "If you use masa harina, it's more processed and it just tastes different, almost synthetic. People do make tamales out of masa harina, but it has a different taste."

The best corn husks, she said, smell like fresh corn. If they're lighter in color, they might be older.

"A lot of the time you won't be able to notice until you start soaking them," she said.

Once you have the ingredients, it's simply a question of mechanics — and some coordination.

"You take the corn husks and then put the masa on there, you spread it along the corn husk, then you fill it with whatever

ingredients you want," Johnson said. "Then you turn them; we don't tie them, but some families do tie them. We fold them in a way where they kind of stay together."

"And then you have to steam them. We steam ours for about an hour and a half. They have to cook all the way through. It's a low steam, so they'll be moist."

Carlito's Burritos, on Patrick Lane, has roots in New Mexico, and so accordingly its tamale ingredients come from there.

"We use a fresh cornmeal that's actually from New Mexico, and then you mix in shortening — traditionally lard, but we use vegetable shortening — and chicken broth

► SEE TAMALES PAGE 3E
The best tactics for fresh taste

Small Plates



COURTESY

Yummy Little Mason Jars at Pantry at The Mirage.

DINING OUT

PANTRY, THE MIRAGE, 3400 LAS VEGAS BLVD. SOUTH
Pantry, The Mirage's updated version of the 24/7 coffee shop, opened this fall. The 149-seat restaurant with decor designed to evoke a French country kitchen has a menu of comfort-food favorites, with breakfast always available. Low-calorie, gluten-free and vegetarian dishes are among the offerings. Here's a sample of the menu:
Breakfast: Granola parfait brulee, \$12; short rib hash and eggs, \$19; Green Eggs & Ham, \$16; Valrhona Grand Cru milk chocolate pancakes, \$16; caprese egg omelet, \$16; hot iron buttermilk vanilla waffle with berries, \$14; Southern cheddar chive biscuit and eggs, \$14; omelet Lorraine, \$14.
Soups and salads: Clam chowder, \$9; roasted tomato soup, \$8; Cobb salad, \$17 for a full,

\$10 for a half; Pantry Caesar, \$12 for a full, \$7 for a half; Eye of the Tiger Tuna, \$19.
Shareable: Damn Good Potato Chips, \$8; fried green tomatoes, \$10; smoked salmon flatbread, \$12; mahi mahi tacos, \$14.
Sandwiches and burgers: Chicken banh mi, \$16; Backyard Burger, \$16; brisket cheese steak, \$17; Garden Burger, \$15; Big T's Grilled Cheese, \$12.

Bigger Things: A Brit's Fish & Chips, \$19; Texas Pete Fried Chicken, \$18; shrimp and cheesy grits, \$19; pork chop schnitzel, \$18; Steak 'n' Taters, \$20.
Sweet things: Yummy Little Mason Jars, chocolate ganache, strawberry shortcake or banana cream pie, \$6 each or three for \$16; handcrafted doughnuts, \$9; warm fruit cobbler, \$10; Your Not So Typical Sundae, \$12.

Pantry is open 24/7. Call 702-696-7050 or visit www.mirage.com.

NEW BOOKS FOR COOKS

BLACK AND WHITE MADELEINES

½ cup all-purpose flour
¼ cup unsweetened cocoa powder, either Dutch-processed or natural
6 tablespoons (¾ stick) unsalted butter, room temperature, plus 2 tablespoons for pans (optional)
½ cup granulated sugar
½ cup semisweet chocolate chips or ½ cup chopped bittersweet chocolate
1/3 cup water, room temperature
1 large egg, room temperature
1½ cups chopped white chocolate or white chocolate chips (not white melting disks found at hobby stores)
Decorations such as edible glitter, stars or sprinkles (optional)

Place rack in center of oven and preheat oven to 325 degrees. Coat one 12-shell madeleine pan or two mini-madeleine pans with baking spray or brush with melted butter. In a small bowl, whisk together flour and cocoa powder. Place butter, sugar and chocolate chips in a 2-quart microwavable glass bowl or measuring cup and microwave on low power for 1 to 2 minutes, until melted. Add water and whisk until thoroughly melted and blended. Add egg, whisking until blended. Stir in flour mixture. Fill shell molds with batter until almost full. Bake for 10 to 12 minutes (or 4 to 5 minutes for minimadeleines). The madeleines are done when they puff up and the dark spot in the center is almost gone.



COURTESY

Remove pans from oven and let cool on a wire rack for 2 to 3 minutes, then invert and tap madeleines onto the rack. Or use a small offset spatula to remove them. Place white chocolate in a microwavable bowl and microwave on low power for 15-second increments, stirring after each, until completely melted. Stir until smooth. Dip each madeleine halfway into the chocolate, scraping the flat side against the side of the bowl. Place on a waxed paper-lined sheet and let set for 15 to 20 minutes. If you are going to add glitter, stars or sprinkles, apply them while the chocolate is still wet. Makes 12 madeleines or 48 minimadeleines. Recipe from "Madeleines" by Barbara Feldman Morse (Quirk Books; \$19.95)

— Heidi Knapp Rinella

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